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DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/INSB

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SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: CHARGE URGES FOREIGN MINISTRY TO SEEK
POSITIVE WAY FORWARD

Classified By: CHARGE D'AFFAIRES JAMES R. MOORE, FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AN
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¶1. (C) SUMMARY: In separate meetings with the Foreign Secretary and Foreign Minister on June 9, Charge emphasized that the U.S. goal is to get bilateral relations with Sri Lanka on a more constructive, cooperative basis, as they were in the past. Charge noted that since the war was now behind us, the U.S. was looking broadly at how it could support the national reconciliation process in Sri Lanka. However, he stated that as a friend of Sri Lanka, the U.S. had concerns about the direction the country was taking. He strongly urged the Foreign Ministry officials to advocate within the government for positive measures on treatment of IDPs and their early return to their places of origin, progress on a political solution, and a decisive improvement in Sri Lanka's poor human rights situation, including the release of several political detainees. Charge objected strenuously to an official publication distributed at the June 3 National Victory Day celebration which misquoted both President Obama and Secretary Clinton and characterized the Secretary as "disingenuous." He deplored defamatory remarks about former Ambassador Robert Blake and Ambassador-designate Butenis in an article posted on the Defense Ministry website. End summary.

"CHAPTER CLOSED"?

¶2. (C) In his meeting with Foreign Secretary Kohona, Charge strongly objected to the publication entitled "Chapter Closed" distributed at National Victory Day, which misquoted both President Obama and Secretary Clinton. He stated that the U.S. was dismayed at the characterization, in this official publication, of Secretary Clinton and her remarks as "disingenuous." Charge also deplored the inappropriately rough treatment of our Co-Chair partner Norway's role in the Cease-Fire Agreement and peace process.

¶3. (C) Kohona assured Charge that he shared our concern about the misquotes and characterization of Secretary Clinton. The publication, he noted, was not prepared by the Foreign Ministry or any part of the "core of the government." He noted that the product had not gone through any editorial process, but "this was not an excuse) the ball was dropped."

FOREIGN MINISTER APOLOGIZES

¶4. (C) Foreign Minister Bogollagama called in Charge on June 9 to follow up on Assistant Secretary Blake's June 5 phone call to the Minister. Charge opened the meeting by telling Bogollagama that there exists an important opportunity for the President to demonstrate his commitment to a process of reconciliation. Charge emphasized it is important to move quickly to do so) the Sri Lankan people expect that. He added that the President's meeting on June 4 with 500 Tamil businessmen was a good initiative. Bogollagama said there were plans to hold many other similar meetings. Charge and the Minister agreed that both countries shared the objective of strengthening bilateral relations and cooperation.

¶5. (C) Bogollagama expressed regret concerning the "Chapter Closed" publication distributed during last week's National Victory Day event. He said it had been prepared in haste by a private contractor for the Department of Government Information and had not been cleared within the government. He said he had complained to the President immediately after the parade, since the publication was sharply critical not only of the international community, but also of the Foreign Ministry. The President was apparently unaware of the publication until he saw it on June 3. Bogollagama apologized to Charge for the publication's criticism of Secretary Clinton and the misquotes of both the President and the Secretary. He called the incident "very embarrassing," and added that a diplomatic note was being sent to all diplomatic missions in Colombo expressing regret for the publication.

DEFAMATORY ARTICLE ON DEFENSE MINISTRY WEBSITE

¶6. (C) Charge pointed out in the meetings with the Foreign Secretary and Foreign Minister that an inappropriate and defamatory article about former Ambassador Robert Blake and Ambassador-designate Butenis still appeared on the website of the Ministry of Defense. The objectionable piece included assertions that Blake "never had the courage to reply when challenged," and "was displaying his contempt to the host nation." In addition, the article alleged that "America wanted to save the LTTE." Charge noted that it was not a question of free speech in this case, but whether such inflammatory material belonged on a Sri Lankan government website. Bogollagama acknowledged the placement of the article on the MOD website was completely inappropriate and emphasized that the article in no way reflected the views of the GSL. Charge pointed out that article was still posted; both Kohona and Bogollagama undertook to have it removed.

DECISIVE STEPS TO PROMOTE RECONCILIATION

¶7. (C) Bogollagama inquired about recent Co-Chair meetings. Charge responded that there had been frequent conference calls, but no face-to-face meeting. Charge explained that the calls were a way for capitals to keep one another informed of their perspectives on the situation in Sri Lanka. Charge informed Bogollagama that a Co-Chairs meeting in Tokyo at the Assistant Secretary level was under consideration and that capitals were trying to reach agreement on a date in July. Charge told Bogollagama that it was important) in the sense of "helping us to help you") that the GSL do the right thing on issues that matter the most, including national reconciliation, offering a viable political solution, providing adequate international access to IDP camps, and permitting early returns of IDPs to their homes.

¶8. (C) Charge asked about the current status of the deliberation of the All-Party Representative Committee on a consensus devolution proposal to heal the ethnic rift. Bogollagama said it was necessary to get all parties on board before a final proposal could be put forward. The President, he added, has invited the Tamil National Alliance to meet with him. President Rajapaksa wanted to hold one meeting together with all the TNA MPs still in the country.

RECONCILIATION LINKED TO HUMAN RIGHTS

¶9. (C) In his meeting with the Foreign Secretary, Charge welcomed steps that the GSL had taken to heal the rifts in Sri Lankan society, including language training for government officers, police training, and reaching out to groups such as the Tamil business community. However, an improvement in the human rights situation was also essential for a viable reconciliation process, Charge stressed.

CONTINUED ATTACKS ON CRITICAL JOURNALISTS

¶10. (C) Charge noted that the recent abduction and beating of journalist Poddala Jayantha had raised wide concern in Washington and other capitals that there seemed to be no end to brutal attacks on journalists. Kohona appeared perplexed, asking what the ordeal of an ethnic Sinhalese, pro-government media worker had to do with reconciliation? Charge responded that a free media landscape was indispensable to the kind of discussion that could lead to reconciliation.

PRESSING FOR RELEASE OF DETAINEES

¶11. (C) Charge stated that the detention of government doctors who had emerged from the safe zone after harrowing experiences and service to their country, and at great personal risk, was in our view, not a gesture that would promote reconciliation. Charge urged the GSL to release the doctors. Kohona pushed back strongly, saying that "the way the doctors kept issuing statements to the media for months was not taken kindly" at the senior levels of government. He noted that the doctors had given interviews to BBC in violation of rules of government service, which prohibited them from talking to the media without the authorization of the Ministry of Health. Further, Kohona accused the doctors of voicing "blatant lies in support of a terrorist organization") an act which, he argued, would even be punishable in the U.S. Charge disputed that assertion, saying that he doubted the doctors had done anything that would be punishable under any U.S. law. Acting DCM asked whether the doctors might have been speaking under duress from the LTTE, as the Information Minister had asserted. Kohona agreed that if that were the case, it would present an avenue of legal defense for the doctors.

¶12. (C) Charge also brought up the case of Stephen Sunthereraj, an employee of a USAID implementing partner, who had been abducted by a white van three hours after his release from detention by the Criminal Investigation Division following a magistrates' order. Kohona stated that he believed Sunthereraj was in official custody, but undertook to look further into the matter.

¶13. (C) Charge noted that the trial of imprisoned journalist J.S. Tissainayagam had dragged on for months, despite the President's statement that a trial could take only a few days. He urged the government to expedite the proceedings and release Tissainayagam if he were acquitted. Charge also pointed out that a conviction would be the first ever in Sri Lanka of a journalist convicted of terrorism because of his writings. Kohona said he had not followed the trial closely but would follow up.

RENEWED REQUEST FOR MEETING WITH SECRETARY

¶14. (C) Bogollagama asked whether Secretary Clinton were planning a trip to South Asia in July; if so, he would like to invite her to add Sri Lanka to the trip. Failing that, Bogollagama again requested a meeting with the Secretary in Washington. COMMENT: Given the prestige associated with such meetings, Post believes it may be premature to offer a meeting at this level to the Sri Lankan government. We will

continue to press the government for concrete steps to show that it is moving to moderate its policies and is serious about a genuine and inclusive national reconciliation process. Foremost among these issues of concern is the humanitarian situation of the 300,000 Sri Lankan citizens detained in IDP camps. We will also continue to advocate for devolution as an essential component of a political solution, and for a marked improvement in Sri Lanka's poor human rights record.

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